

MY EXPERIENCES AS A WRITER OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

—NILIMA SINHA

The very first book I wrote was some time in the late 1970s, and you'll be surprised to know it was in Hindi! My kids were voracious readers. I had encouraged them to read by reading to them and with them. I wanted books to give my children as much happiness as they had given me when I was a child. I remember giving a book of poems, *When you are Six* to my daughter on her sixth birthday. I read out the little poems and she loved them. She read them with me and we enjoyed the book together. It resulted in her developing a great love for books and I felt most satisfied. It was the same with my elder son. He had a passion for information and as an eleven year old read complicated adult books on topics such as the *Life of Hitler*, *The Story of Art* and a *History of Europe*, besides books like *Chariot of the Gods*, *Lord of the Ring* etc. The youngest child showed no interest in reading at first. He was finally initiated into it by his sister, who insisted on reading out "Noddy" and "Secret Seven" to him. Enid Blyton finally succeeded in enticing him to the world of books.

Unfortunately, though all three liked to read, they would not touch a book in Hindi, their mother tongue. It disturbed me. I tried to find them good books in Hindi, but none were available.

So it occurred to me - why not write one myself?

That was how I wrote my first story - I won't call it a book, for it never reached that stage unfortunately! It was based, now that I look back, rather childishly, on the "Five Find-Outers" of

Enid Blyton. Since children liked the "Fives" books, why not give them something similar in Hindi? At least it would make them read the book, I thought. It was an exciting mystery story (my daughter gave her certificate by managing to read it to the end declaring it to be as good as any Enid Blyton book!) It has five characters as in the "Fives", but it was an entirely original story set in indigenous surroundings.

The work found a buyer pretty soon. I was thrilled and dreamt I had become a great author! I was paid a paltry Rs. 200/- for a 35-40,000 word novel, but the money did not matter to me. It was the vision of seeing it in print, complete with beautiful illustrations, that made my heart leap with pride.

Alas, the book never saw the light of day! At first, I made enquiries quite often. The publisher, or whoever he was assured me each time, the book would be out soon. But it never came out. To this day I do not know what happened to it!

A new writer lacks confidence. At least I did. I imagined all kinds of terrible things and felt humiliated each time I failed to contact the man. Finally I gave up. I wonder what the mystery behind the affair was. Also, why did I not have the courage to pursue and unravel the mystery?

Meanwhile, a friend Mrs. Kamath, invited me to join the story-writing workshop started at CBT by Mr. Shankar. I came here, met Mrs. Jafa and attended her workshops. It was most useful and very encouraging to meet others in the field.

Before long however, my husband was transferred to Patna. With my husband too busy with

work and the children left behind at Delhi to study, I felt extremely lonely at home. I joined Notre Dame, the Convent, as a school-teacher for primary classes. Though I enjoyed teaching greatly, it still left me insufficiently occupied.

That was when I saw the CBT advertisement. A competition for children's fiction? An exciting challenge indeed! I had written one long novel already. Why not try again?

It did not take me long to decide the subject. A mystery—adventure story of course! But it should not be based on the usual Enid Blyton. It should be very Indian, and convey some message. It must give some lesson to the reader, I decided in my ignorance. The casteism rampant in Bihar had always disturbed me greatly. In my attempts to fill time, I had begun to teach a group of children from the deprived section. To my surprise, I found that a child from a Rajput or a Brahman family would refuse to sit next to one from another caste. In my book, I thought, I would try to give a message against such discrimination.

I remembered my childhood years spent at my mother's place in Surajpura, a village in Bihar. There was an ancient fort there with underground rooms and passages, which had frightened me as a child. My grandfather, a *Zamindar* with the title of "Rajah" bestowed on him by the British, lived in what was known as the "Palace". I built up on the exotic memories I had of the place. I remembered the grandeur of a wedding celebrated there, with elephants and *shehnai* players. I drew upon those memories for the exotic, romantic descriptions that built up the atmosphere. The exciting locations helped create the situations too.

I employed what I thought was a unique technique in relating the story. Each chapter was written from one character's point of view. For example, the first chapter had the youngest child, Sunil's point of view, the second Praveen's, the third Sarika's, the fourth again kept Sunil's view point and so on. Sometimes it created

problems in co-ordinating the action, but somehow it made things easier too. I do not know what others feel about this because I learnt later that the writer should stick to one person's point of view. It should be someone's story, as Mrs. Jafa has told us time and again. However, since each chapter had one character's viewpoint only, perhaps it did not matter so much.

The Chandipur Jewels took about 3 months to write. I think this first book was more inspiration than perspiration, for it came along pretty fast. Nevertheless, I went over each page, each time, each word again and again until I was sure it was exactly right. Imagine my thrill and excitement when it actually won the First Prize! My happiness knew no bounds. I felt I had made it at last!

Immediately I began to write again. CBT had announced another competition. Brimming with confidence and exuberance, I wrote my second great novel, *The Forgotten Children*.

Maybe it was the title which did it, for this book ended up as a "forgotten manuscript"! It did not win a prize. I took it to Vikas. The editor accepted it and even got some changes made. Then one fine day, it was sent back, with no letter of explanation or excuse. I was too demoralised to protest, or even to ask why it was returned. Instead, I sent it to India Book House, who accepted it too. I was paid a sum of Rs. 4,500, but later told that the *Cheetah Series*, under which it was to be published, had been wound up.

Each time I received a setback, or felt demoralised, I escaped into my imaginary world. It was the best medicine for depression, I discovered. So without much ado or grief I plunged into another book. The Chandipur formula worked again and *Vanishing Trick at Chandipur* was born. It won the Second Prize.

Another year, another competition. Meanwhile, the comment that my books were too Enid Blytonish, made me attempt something different. I opted for historical fiction. It had to

be action packed, exciting, yet filled with something more, which I decided would be patriotism this time. I met several persons who had been part of the students' procession at Patna during the Quit India movement. Eleven students, some of them school children, had died in the police firing while attempting to hoist the national flag on the Secretariat roof. What a good subject for an inspiring story of patriotism and nationalism, I thought. By keeping a Muslim boy and Hindu boy as heroes who took part together in the freedom struggle, and describing the deep friendship amongst them, I would also promote national integration. I thought I had hit upon a brilliant theme, but obviously others did not agree, for the book *Adventure Before Midnight* won no prize, though it was published later. Much later, it was also selected for the White Raven List.

I was down in the dumps again. May be mystery-adventure was what publishers wanted. Any other subject left them doubtful and unsure of success in the market. So I turned back to the "formula" story again. What I actually wanted was to write a series on the Chandipur characters: I planned to set the stories in different interesting areas of Bihar like Nalanda, the Nepal Terai (North Bihar), the coal belt, and several other remote places I had visited, but which remained unknown generally.

But I was unsure of the response. There was no feedback from publishers and I was too lacking in confidence to ask. Children liked the books, it seemed. But what did the marketing department feel? All CBT books got sold, I was informed. But would they want another book on the same characters? Well, yes, why not, if it was good. It did not really answer my doubts. It was best to try something different. A trip to Kashmir made me decide. Once again, it was the charming, exotic scenery which set me off. I wanted to describe it. I wanted to put into pleasing words what I had seen and enjoyed. I wanted others, children specially, to share in the beauty

of the mountains, the lake, the houseboat and the life in Kashmir. Mere description would not attract, it had to have action for the child reader. So, spies, mystery, the scenery, identical twins to have fun with and plenty of suspense and excitement - and the story was evolved! *Adventure on the Golden Lake* won a Second Prize.

By now I was tired of mystery and adventure. I felt I should write something more worthwhile, with more depth and value. What was I giving to children beyond entertainment and excitement? Of course I tried to provide enough information through detailed descriptions, and attempted to paint a vivid picture of the locale. *Golden Lake* presented the scenic beauty of Kashmir, *Vanishing Trick* described Bihar and its villages and *Adventure Before Midnight* told about the "Quit India" period in India's history. But was it enough?

It did not give me satisfaction. I felt I had outgrown the mystery novel. Something more challenging was needed. A competition announced by Delhi Administration for a book on the freedom struggle caught my attention. I talked to Surekha Panandiker and Ira Saxena, and they agreed to join in the project. It was a good experience. Not only did we gain a lot of knowledge and information through painstaking research, we also learnt to work together as a team. Authors have their ego hassles. But we learnt to accept criticism sportingly and to criticise constructively. *Triumph of Non-violence* was written by three persons, so we thought it might not be considered in the competition. We gave it to Frank Brothers.

Based on the research, we wrote *Together We Marched* for Publications Divisions. This book too had national integration as its theme.

In my attempt to move away from "mystery" novels, I did various other projects and wrote short stories, plays and picture-books.

In between these odd projects I wrote another Chandipur story, *SOS From Munia*, which is also set in Bihar, in the mica belt around Hazar-

ibagh. It is a beautiful area full of forests, lakes and hills. Unfortunately the forests are on the verge of depletion. Every time I see the women and girls with huge loads of wood on their heads, it disturbs me. Here we are, talking of Environment and urging city children not to cut down trees as if they are the ones who do it! What are we doing to prevent the actual chopping off? And who are we to tell those poor women not to do it? All these thoughts which agitated me got reflected in *SOS from Munia*. It is about Munia, the married girlchild, who lives in the area and is forced to carry home the wood. The solution is offered in the form of the scientist who decides to invent an alternative cheap fuel for girls like Munia.

I also tried to write in Hindi. My reason for writing in the first place, was to make our children enjoy Hindi books as much as they did English ones. My first book had been in Hindi. It had met a tragic end. I made another attempt and CBT was kind enough to choose it for publication, though no prize was awarded.

Writing for children has been a very enjoyable experience for me. At first it was a hobby. Now it is my occupation. There are always ups and downs but the satisfaction of completing a book makes up for the disappointments one may have to face. It is the striving for excellence, the attempts to reach perfection, and the joy one gets when the work is finally completed exactly as one wanted it, that make the writer go on.

The monetary satisfaction is negligible but the thrill of creating something one feels good about, ultimately compensates. By writing for children I have learnt to keep control over words, to be brief and precise. I learnt not to ramble over long descriptions which only bore children, and to use words effectively so that maximum effect is created through minimum words. I learnt to keep ideas simple and uncomplicated, to be direct and honest and to talk in specific terms rather than generalise. Besides, by writing for children I gained a lot of knowl-

edge about the environment, animals and birds, history and geography, subjects I had lost contact with once I left school. I feel I am a person with much more awareness and knowledge of things around for I look at them with the curious, interested eyes of a child wondering what I could write about next!

Coming to mystery stories, we all know what the ingredients are—something to solve, a puzzle to unravel, a bit of suspense and excitement, action, and a satisfactory, logical end where the puzzle is finally solved.

Sounds simple, doesn't it?

Maybe it is not that easy. After all, how many puzzles are there to solve? And how many criminals can children catch?

If we keep our eyes and ears open, we can find any number of incidents that can be spun into a story. The papers are full of them. A passport racket busted, a dog helping to catch a thief, the visitor at the door who attempts to steal, a forgery detected, even minor events such as the milkman cheating, the aunt who misplaces her key, the father who is suspected of committing a fraud and school incidents can be used as the "seed ideas" behind a mystery story. May be it will help if the ending or the catching of the culprit is decided on first. The rest can be built up going backwards. Who will catch the culprit? A boy who will help? A girl...and so on, until you come to the beginning. What was the mysterious, inexplicable happening right in the beginning which set off the chain of events? Then maybe a few more incidents to lead to a false trail, some to the right one, and the reader is led gradually through connected incidents towards the final solution. A chase or some other fast-paced action can increase the suspense and excitement. Descriptions of old houses, ghostly surroundings, eerie and frightening build up of atmosphere add to the tension and mystery. Children like to be frightened, as long as there is a happy end to it. However, I also feel that mystery and fast action are not enough to

lend depth to a children's novel. The child of today is much more mature, aware and knowledgeable to be satisfied with a simple tale. He needs emotional satisfaction and guidance too in these conflicting times. Therefore, to my mind, there should be something of more lasting value as well. Through an exciting, fast-paced story there must be an effort to give something of significant value to the child.

Enid Blyton's books, though lightly and readily written, emphasise values such as love, friendship, courage and charity through characters and incidents. Other good mystery novels bring out conflicts and the interplay of emotions between the various characters, finally leading to a resolution of the conflict. Thus, while

providing suspense, excitement and emotional problems, other values such as care of the environment, staying away from drugs, national integration, the triumph of good over evil, and other topics of the day can be effectively dealt with in a mystery book.

A mystery story can also be a story set in a particular period of history. Spies in Moghul courts, incidents from famous battles, intrigues at court, conspiracies, secret meetings—enough material can be taken from the pages of Indian history.

The scope for mystery stories is endless. One only has to pick up the right incidents and use them imaginatively.

These are some of the thoughts which I felt I could share with you.

I stayed on at the Art Institute to teach and, as a member of the Chicago Society of Artists, I was another exhibiting artist who exhibited far more than she sold. The stack of easel paintings grew. And with it grew my sense of futility. So much work of so little real use! I was more stimulated by the children's books I did on the side. They were used and I was paid for doing them.

Now I squeeze in time for an easel painting now and then but most of my working hours are spent on books for boys and girls. Many of the books are regional because I am so curious about out-of-the-way places. I become intrigued by a certain spot and then, sooner or later, I find myself, armed with coloured chalk and a sketch pad, sitting on that spot—a houseboat near the Golden Gate Bridge, a llama trail in the Andes, a Seminole Indian camp in the Everglades, an island in Mexico where the huge butterfly dip nets are made, a Nova Scotia pilot boat bringing a freighter from the Bay of Fundy into Digby, a bathhouse in Japan.

Whenever possible I live native style in order to soak in the native point of view. The story plot is dreamed up after I return to my studio. Recently a breathy child voice spoke to me over the telephone.

"Is this the Laura Bannon who makes books? Well, that doll in your book is exactly what I have been looking for. Can I buy her?"

I remembered my disappointment in that particular book. Its parts had certainly failed to fit together like an egg in its shell. But now I feel better about it.

Laura Bannon